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ABSTRACT

The language experience approach (LEA) has been used successfully with students who are beginning to read in English as a second language. In an LEA lesson the teacher can elicit students' comments on a wordless picture book, transcribe students' sentences, read the resultant story aloud (or have the class read it), and have the story copied. Teachers should transcribe exactly what students dictate for three reasons: the core of LEA is using the beginning reader's language as the base on which to build reading materials, the focus of the lesson should be on content rather than on surface forms, and exact transcriptions provide a record of progress as well as data for further lesson planning. The LEA materials may be used as the basis for many later rereading activities. Teachers can organize their classes so that they teach LEA lessons to small groups of students, or they can let students act as their own scribes, providing help with expression of ideas and with spelling as needed. Among LEA "starters" that can be used in addition to wordless picture books, some of which may be made by students, are wordless comic books and films; dramatics activities, role-playing activities, and guessing games, in which students' dialogue or questions are transcribed; stories read aloud to students; and classroom experiences. (GT)

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# Beginning to Read in English the LEA Way

Pat Rigg

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The language experience approach (LEA) to reading is an approach based on two assumptions, one about language, one about reading. The first is that language is a meaningful whole; if it gets yanked apart into little pieces, it is not language anymore. A full, clear explanation of this view can be found in Burke, 1972. The second assumption is that reading is a language process and, as a part of language, it too must always be a meaningful whole (Y. Goodman, 1976). From these assumptions comes the basic technique, which uses the student's ideas and the student's language in the preparation of beginning reading materials. The student decides what she wants to say and how she wants to say it, and then dictates that to the teacher, who acts as a scribe. Numerous books and articles on LEA for students beginning to read in their native language are available; one of the most recent is van Allen's Language Experience Activities (1976) which has 250 different activities for native English speakers. In this article I want to suggest how LEA can be used with students who are beginning to read in English as a second language (ESL).

First, let's go through a sample LEA lesson, step by step. Then we can look at some of the possible variations on the basic technique, and at different ways to elicit LEA materials, and, finally, we can glance at one or two of the problems.

The requirements for an LEA lesson are the same as those for a creative writing lesson: there has to be something to say, someone to say it to, and some reason why written language is more appropriate for this message and this audience than spoken language. Let me

explain that last part a bit. Written language, as opposed to spoken language, is used when we want to communicate across time or across space. If we want a record of what happened, of what we said or thought or did, we write it down. A tape recording of oral conversations does not at all capture the ideas put forth, the points well made, the decisions reached. Anyone who tried to struggle through some of the Nixon transcripts recognizes this. In the sample LEA lesson we are going to look at, written language is more appropriate than spoken because the students are creating a story that will be added to their class storybook.

There are innumerable ways to start an LEA story, because there are innumerable things to talk about. One of my favorite LEA starters is a wordless picture book, which tells a complete story through pictures, without any text. Two authors in particular, Martha Alexander and Mercer Mayer, delight youngsters. (Both authors are published by Dial Press, 1 Dag Hammarskjold Plaza, NY, NY 10017, USA.) To use a wordless picture book for the LEA story, the teacher first lets the students read the story; that is, look at the pictures. This step seldom requires talking by teacher or student; like most reading activity, it's a sort of quiet conversation between author and reader.

After the students have read the story, the teacher can elicit their discussion of it. The aim of the discussion is to reach consensus on basic plot line and character development; once this goal is reached, the teacher can begin to record the story. Each student is given the opportunity to offer at least one sentence that builds the story. The teacher writes what each student says where everyone can read it, on the board or an overhead projector. Immediately after transcribing each sentence, the teacher may read it aloud very quickly, underlining with his finger as he reads, and ask, "Did I get it right? Is that what you want to say? Is that the way you

want to say it?" As each paragraph is completed, this finger-pointing and reading aloud can be repeated. I don't mean the teacher points to each word and says each word slowly and distinctly. Far from it. The oral reading is fast. This is because the material is real, whole language; it is not a word list, nor a structure drill.

The continual oral rereading has three purposes: it refreshes the students' memories as to what they have already said; it gives the students a chance to edit, to change what they've dictated if they wish; thirdly, the constant repetition which associates meanings with visual shapes will soon result in the students reading this text without assistance.

After the entire story has been dictated, the teacher reads it through aloud, giving the authors another chance to edit their work. Frequently, at least some of the authors read along out loud, particularly those portions which they dictated. Sometimes, especially when the story is short, the class reads it in chorus with the teacher. Those who prefer to read silently do so. It is a good idea to get as much rereading of the completed story as possible at this time. The story then should be copied by someone--the teacher, an aide, a student, all the students--because it is the raw material of several successive reading lessons.

Teachers trying LEA for the first time need to remind themselves that their job is to write what the students say, not to write what they want the students to say. That's important. I remember one teacher telling me that LEA just wasn't working with a young boy she was tutoring, so I observed her, to see what was going on. My record of her LEA lesson went something like this: "Well, Stevie, what shall we write about today? Would you like to write a story about this picture? What shall we say first? Shall we talk about the people in the

picture? Do you want to say, 'The people are playing a game.' Is that the first sentence in our story? Oooooh, I like that." Stevie nodded his head and looked out the window a lot. Like many teachers, this one equated teaching with talking; once she realized that one could teach with one's mouth shut, she began to get some stories from Stevie, and she decided that LEA wasn't a flop after all. In order to write what the students say, the teacher has to give them plenty of chances to say something: this means that the teacher must supply time, silence, and attention. Some teachers find themselves almost daily telling their classes, "I want you to listen carefully. Now pay attention." Those teachers will perhaps find it refreshing to change roles with the students, and the teacher listen carefully.

I want to mention another point while I'm talking about writing what the students say rather than what the teacher thinks they should say: If the students dictate something ungrammatical, the teacher must transcribe it as dictated, grammatical mistakes and all. One of my students gave me this sentence from page one of Mayer's A Boy, A Dog, and A Frog. "Boy and dog walking." That's what I wrote, and that's what I said when I read it aloud. "Boy and dog walking." I didn't make any changes, and I didn't make any comments about the grammar.

There are three main reasons for transcribing exactly what is dictated, without any discussion of grammar and without any grammatical "improvements" by the teacher. First, the core of LEA is using the beginning reader's language as the base on which to build reading materials, and that means the reader's language, not someone else's.

Second, the focus of the lesson should not deteriorate into a presentation of grammatical niceties. Third, transcribing exactly what the students say gives the ESL teacher both a record of progress and data for further lesson planning.

The first reason is the most vital. LEA works when the students' beginning reading materials, developed by the students with the teacher's help, have the students' ideas in the students' language. If it's the teacher's ideas and the teacher's language, it may be marvelous material, but it isn't LEA. LEA works because students tend to be able to read what they have just said. It's more difficult to read what someone else has just said, but it's easier if what has been written down is the result of a commonly experienced event- such as a class discussion. "Boy and dog walking" are the student's present language forms. If I have to bite my tongue to keep from correcting that sentence, I bite it. Frequently, a student who's more proficient in English will want to correct her classmate's English errors. I do not want and will not allow one student to yell out comments about another's contributions. For a class LEA story (rather than an individual one), when I reread the sentence and ask, "Did I write this correctly? Is this the way you want to say it?" a more advanced student may suggest that "boy and dog" be altered to read "a boy and a dog." When one student suggests changing another's sentence, I always ask the original author for permission before changing anything.

The second reason for writing exactly what is dictated is that, if I interfere during the transcription step by changing the language or by making it clear to the students that I expect them to change it somehow, then I am focussing their attention on surface forms

rather than on content. My interference suggests, however inadvertently, that reading is really another grammar lesson. I don't want to give my students that impression. I believe reading is going from print to meaning, and I want them to believe that too, and to go for the meaning whenever they try to read anything, rather than lose the meaning because they are concerned with form more than with content. Some teachers object to writing exactly what the students say, incorrect grammar and all, because they feel that the teacher is reinforcing poor English by not correcting the mistakes. Maybe, but I don't think so. The teacher is recording and repeating the students' sentences; that may be reinforcing to some students sometimes. And if it is sometimes reinforcing, what is getting reinforced--the contribution of an idea or the format in which the idea was presented? One really cannot tell. Most of the research that's been done on language acquisition has been done with first language learning and may not apply to second language learning, but, in first language learning, the focus is on the meaning, not on the form. If a child says, "Mommy home," and it is her mommy pulling into the driveway, her daddy is likely to say, "Yes, Mommy's home." But if a child says, "Mommy's home," and it's not Mommy, no one compliments the child on her excellent use of contracted to be; Daddy says, "No, you're wrong. That's not Mommy." We all learn to speak our first language pretty well, and we do so while attention is directed to content, not to form. Maybe our second language learners can learn ESL while directing their attention to meaning, rather than to form. That is what the teacher is doing when he transcribes what is said without correcting the grammar: he's paying attention to meaning. I hope his doing so will "reinforce" the students' tendency to do the same.

The third reason the teacher-scribe needs to write what's dictated without interfering or changing it is that the students' volunteered sentences, which are recorded in the LEA story, supply excellent information about the students' present proficiency in the language and their progress. Let me give a couple of examples. The first example was dictated by a fifteen-year-old Russian-speaker who had been in the USA five months, attending a bilingual school (Hebrew-English). This excerpt comes from the story he dictated based on Alexander's Out! Out!:

> Mother is in kitchen. She make baby lunch. Small child sit on the chair and eat. Bird sit on window and child give for the bird his eat. In the corridor is other child; he playing his train. He pull train for tie.

This next example is a description of a picture postcard; it was dictated by a 25-year-old Yugoslav:

> In the picture I can see old building, river Drima, trees. This is a river is beautiful. This is a building is old. I am looking trees walnut. I am looking little building. I am looking mountains Majevica.

The Russian-speaker's LEA story suggests that he is ready for some grammatical lessons on the present progressive; the Yugoslav's suggests that he needs some work on compound nouns (walnut trees Majevica mountains).

This sort of information is invaluable to the teacher who is individualizing the class, giving to each student what that student needs then, and to the teacher who wants to individualize but doesn't know quite where to begin. The old axiom, "Begin where the student is," is splendid advice, but first one needs to find out where the student is. Recording what each student says as each student says it helps to find out. Also, the LEA stories provide a running

record of progress in the language. The Russian who needed to work on the present progressive when he read Out! Out! dictated a short description of a picture a week later, and a week after that, he self-corrected two uses of the present progressive. Here is his original dictation, with his corrections marked:

> Two ladies are playing in tennis. In the hand they are holding the rackets. One from they is running to ball.

A month later, the same student dictated this (the self-corrections were made two weeks after that):

> The boy lives on the ranch. He helps for his parents. He gives the food for the cocks....The cows eats the grass and he watches for them.

Of course, these self-corrections are possible only when the student can reread her LEA story. This is the reason the stories are copied after they have been dictated; if they are convenient to the students, on the bulletin board, or in the students' folders, they can be read and reread and reread. Every time the student rereads her LEA story, the reading is faster and easier. Many students, without prodding, begin to make comments about individual words and even individual letters. "That word's dog, right? That's a d, isn't it?" Such comments let the teacher know how finely the student is tuning in to the reading process.

I do not mean to imply that I want the student to be concerned with individual words or with letters. If the student who dictated "boy and dog walking" reads it aloud as "boy and puppy walking," great. That sort of reading lets me know that his focus in on meaning, which is where I want it.

Let me outline very briefly just a few examples of later lessons that can be based on an LEA story. The story can be transformed into a cloze exercise by simply blocking out every fifth or tenth word. It can be turned into a modified cloze by blocking out every nth noun or verb, or adjective. Any vocabulary item that is predictable can be blocked out. For a group, vocabulary items for which there are several synonyms can be omitted, and the group will probably enjoy discussing the options. Cloze and modified cloze exercises give the reader practice in using context; they are particularly good for the student who is a very slow reader because she is overly cautious and will not guess. Faced with this from her own LEA story, she will probably be less hesitant: "The boy and dog walking home from _____. They see a frog _____."

What can be done for those students who, the teacher suspects, have merely memorized the stories and are not reading them? Copy each sentence from the story separately on a 3x5 card; shuffle the cards; have the student arrange them in the correct order. Another use of LEA stories: the students can underline everything that they know. Or the reverse; they can underline what they don't know. All of these suggestions for further use of the LEA stories use rereading and more rereading as the basic technique; they use copies and more copies of the LEA stories, so whenever possible, when the stories are being typed or otherwise copied neatly, they should be put on ditto or mimeograph master.

There are many variations to the basic LEA process that I've just described, although they all use the student's ideas in the students' language. The sample LEA lesson I talked about was with a class, and the entire class produced one story together. I want now to suggest, first, how LEA materials can be elicited from individuals and groups, and, second, how the students can be their

Working with one student at a time on a LEA story sounds to most classroom teachers like a dream, beautiful but impossible. It isn't really impossible, though, at least not in classrooms where the teacher can arrange things so that he has 20-30 minutes with one group of eight students. Teachers with aides, parent volunteers, or older student volunteers, and teachers with self-contained classrooms will have much less difficulty with this than teachers who meet their many, large classes only a few hours a week. Once the teacher gets a group of students together for the LEA activity, the first step, like the first step in creating a LEA story with an entire class, is having something to say, someone to say it to, and some reason for saying it in writing. In one variation the teacher starts the entire group on a common topic, then each member of the group draws an illustration, a picture of that topic, as the teacher moves from student to student, transcribing each one's individual story in turn. Another LEA variation begins by giving each student a cartoon strip which has had the dialog blacked out and the first or last frame cut off; this lends itself particularly well to eliciting different verb tenses in ESL. That is, if the first frame of a cartoon strip is omitted, the teacher can ask, "What happened before?" and have the students invent the situation in which their cartoon might have occurred, as well as inventing the appropriate dialog and description of the situation. Similarly, if the last frame is omitted, the teacher can ask, "What will happen?" and the students invent probable future situations and dialogs. A variation of this also uses comic strips with blacked-out dialogs, but also cuts the strips into separate frames. Each student arranges the frames in the sequence she wants, pastes them

that way, and creates the dialog to fit. All of these variations keep each student working quietly while the teacher works with one at a time.

A good way for the teacher to get more time with each student is to let the students write their own LEA material, act as their own scribes. This technique can work even with students who cannot yet write legibly. For example, each student in a group can select a picture, "write" a caption for that picture, and then read the caption to the teacher. With youngsters under nine, that last step is often vital because the teacher may not be able to decipher the child's scribble. The child, however, can, and once the child has told the teacher what her writing says, the teacher can write or type that in legible form. Although sometimes the teacher will want to write down the student's caption immediately, usually this step is better carried out later, during the teacher's class preparation time. The typed captions can be returned to the students the next day, to be reread and perhaps pasted on the pictures to which they belong. One terrific teacher I know lets two or three of her students discuss their pictures and captions; then she puts several captions (without their pictures) on the desk and asks the students to find their own, or to find their friend's. For more advanced students, this teacher also will place several key words from each student's LEA story on the desk and ask the student to select a word and tell whose story it came from. One of the things that makes this teacher terrific is that she does <u>not</u> ask the students to say exactly what the phrase or word is; she only asks them to identify which whole a specific part fits into. The students are usually quite good at this; the task is comparable to being faced with two assembled jigsaw puzzles from each of which a couple of pieces

are missing, being given a piece and asked, "which puzzle does this go in?"

Getting the student to act as her own scribe adds a fourth process, writing, to the three language arts which are already integrated into LEA. The processes of listening and speaking are used in the discussion and dictation of the story; the process of reading is used in the steps of dictation, transcription and rereading. The initial examples of writing will probably be far from polished prose. Just as sometimes in the discussion and dictation steps, a student will ask how to express her idea, how to say it in English, so too will the student need help in writing it in English. Let me give a couple of examples. The first example comes from a 12-year-old Russian boy whom I was tutoring. He arrived for our lesson clearly upset, and when I asked him to select a picture and begin writing about it, he said, "I do not like writing!" So I wrote, "I do not like writing!" and asked him to tell me what else he didn't like. "I do not like my new teacher!" I told him to write about that, and this is what he wrote:

> I do not like writing!
> I do not like my new teacher!
> Bukose she do not give me worka doo, and vyan I ame going to da bas room and she sad kam, ryil fast. Vyan I ame kam bak and sedan I ame seding vyan finusht a scul!!!
> thE -And

Getting his anger and frustration down on paper must have been therapeutic, because he was quite calm when it read it aloud to me, so that I could type it in standard spelling for him to read the next day.

> I do not like writing!
> I do not like my new teacher!
> -Because she do not give me work to do, and when I am going to the bath room and she said, "Come, real fast." When I am come back and sit down, I am sitting when finished a school!!!

Every ESL student will need help with spelling, some more than others. The Arab-speaker who wrote this next example, based on a picture, has much more difficulty with English spelling than the Russian boy does.

I lik wother ske becas det sports very hart. Bat
Somach pipl think tht sport wery ise. An this picker
I sou two pipls men and woman had pley wother ski.
He hold hr wout one hens. Shi hold sou hart wout
bout hens waer, bickas shi maybe afraid tu fol down.
Bout shi loks sou hapi I se an hr fes smile.

I like water ski because that sport's very hard. But
some people think that sport very easy. In this
picture I saw two peoples, man and woman, had play water ski.
He hold her with one hands. She hold so hard with
both hands wire, because she maybe afraid to fall down.
But she looks so happy. I see on her face smile.

With both the Russian's and the Arab's stories, I corrected this spelling as a matter of course when I typed up what they had written, but I didn't really pay much attention to spelling, nor did I ask them to. From each story or article that they wrote, I usually found two to five words that they consistently used and just as consistently misspelled. "Vyan" for "when", "ame" for "am" in the first example, "shi" for "she", "hart" for "hard" in the second, are typical of what I found and gave to the student as his spelling list for the day. I was far more interested in finding out from their writing what vocabulary and grammar lessons they still needed and which ones they were ready for. And of course the primary reason for asking them to write was to elicit reading material for them, material that would be easy to read, and very meaningful to read because it was their own thoughts in their own forms of English.

Sometimes a teacher will say to me, "LEA sounds nice, but I don't have wordless picture books. What else can I use as a starter?"

I have mentioned several LEA "starters" in passing; let me review those and suggest a few others. One type of starter is whatever tells a story through pictures and without any text. Wordless picture books belong to this type, but so do comic strips without words, as do films and video tapes without print. The wordless film, The Red Balloon, is the ideal for this type as are video tapes of pantomimists like Marcel Marceau. Books, films, video tapes all cost money, which often precludes our having them. Homemade substitutes for some can be made in the class by the students, as part of their English lessons. The students can make their own wordless picture books with pictures from magazines, with their own drawings, with snapshots; all of these in various combinations. From a first or second grader, for example, can come a series of LEA materials that form the child's individual reading book.

I remember one proud youngster's collection: Maria's Book said the cover, beneath a snapshot of Maria herself. Inside were various stories, articles, and poems, all created by Maria as LEA materials, all illustrated by her drawings, or her selection of magazine pictures, or photographs in which she figured prominently. The same sorts of material, especially snapshots, were used with a 56-year-old Spanish-speaking immigrant to the US who did not read in either Spanish or English.

Few schools can afford to make their own films and video tapes, but every class can produce its own shows. I do not mean extensive dramatic productions that take weeks and even months; I mean tiny dramas, produced as part of other activities. Several games, for instance, can become tiny dramas, and if used with a group or even a whole class in the ESL lesson, can produce LEA reading material. For example, the game of guess-what-I-am requires one student to

pantomime while the others must ask her questions. That is, the ESL lesson is formation of questions. The teacher can write some of the questions on the board as they are asked. "You live in Quebec? You a bear?" After a couple of actors have had their turn, the teacher can use the questions he's written in two or three ways. The easiest way is for the students to reread them with him and copy them. Another way is to discuss the questions themselves: What can you find out from this question?; what were you thinking of when you asked that? On the basis of that discussion the teacher can elicit reading material from the group or from each student. Here's a sample excerpt:

> I thought Jean was a bird, so I asked, "You can fly?"
> Jean said "No, cannot fly."

After this game has been played several times, the teacher may want to discuss basic types of questions, and to write these on a flip-chart where they can be kept to use whenever the game is played. Are you a _____? Are you _____ing now? Do you have any _____?

The same sort of use can be made of the game, guess-what-I-am-doing, a much simpler game for students of beginning English proficiency. Because the basic question for this game, and sometimes the only one used, is "Are you _____ing?", the flip chart for this game can have large pockets, and as the students get more vocabulary, the teacher can add word cards to the pockets. Two or more students can then use the flip chart together while they play, selecting the card they want and holding it in the blank. The one who is It must read the question.

Any role-playing activity can be used as an LEA starter. The teacher records what the students say and after the role-playing is

finished, reads their words back to them, giving them a chance to edit.

Another way to start an LEA lesson is by reading a story aloud to the students. Their discussion of that story can be the LEA material; or the story may spark enough interest so that each wants to create her own. One youngster I knew loved Monster stories (Bowmar Press); his teacher would read him a Monster story, and then he would dictate a story of his own about Monster. With adult ESL students, I have had very good results using folk tales: I read one to them, and they are reminded of folktales from their childhood. These tales, after being typed and copied, are often shared proudly with classmates.

Some of the very best LEA stories are created without any books or pictures or games or role-playing. They come from the current activities and the current feelings of the students themselves. One of the best LEA starters I ever saw was a puppy which the teacher brought to class. The children held it, stroked it, sniffed it, felt it lick their faces, and of course, talked about it. The anger felt by the boy whose teacher did not give him work to do stimulated a strong piece of writing. What students are vitally interested in is always the best topic for their LEA activities: they will have a great deal to say and what they have said will be easy for them to read.

Is LEA appropriate for any ESL student just beginning to read English? Certainly not. Students who are unable to speak at all, or students for whom connected discourse is painfully difficult would find LEA to be a frustrating experience. Students who do have a basic vocabulary and an expressed desire to communicate and "try their ESL wings" might find LEA very rewarding. It is not

appropriate for the student who has almost no English, the child who spends only two to five periods a week studying English and who knows no English speaker with whom he wants to converse or has to converse. Further, if his English lessons are based on the assumption that language is an arbitrary system of sounds, and that the system is mastered through controlled drill which establishes automatic habits, then he probably spends most of his ESL class time repeating sentences like "This is a glove. These are gloves. This is a hat. These are hats." This child is not building much of a base for meaningful use of English, and therefore he's not building the base for reading English. For the student with some proficiency in ESL, the language experience approach to beginning reading in English provides for a wide variety of reading material, material that every student finds easy to read and interesting to read. I know of no published material that matches those two criteria.

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